



# San Bernardino National Forest Management of Drought-Related Vegetation Mortality

## BACKGROUND

Large stands of trees and brushland are dying in the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains due to a four-year drought. The drought, the worst in recorded history, has significantly stressed the vegetation. As a result, populations of bark beetles have risen rapidly, killing large numbers of the drought-weakened trees. Pathogens such as root disease and dwarf mistletoe are also killing the weakened trees.

The area affected in all vegetation types by the disaster was 66,000 acres in October 2002, is now 354,000 acres and is increasing daily. Within this total area affected, in pine and mixed conifer stands, it has grown from an estimated 66,000 acres in October 2002 to 175,000 acres in April 2003. The dead and dying trees pose a significant wildfire hazard and thousands of homes are at risk. The removal of dead and dying trees is difficult and expensive, a problem complicated by the limited market for timber products in Southern California. However, to-date a local, state-wide, and out-of-state market is responding to the contracting opportunities available.

## CURRENT STATUS

The drought related vegetation mortality situation on the Forest remains dynamic. Areas of mortality continue to expand despite spring rains. We are very concerned that mortality this year could be higher than last year.

The San Bernardino National Forest has led the effort in forming the Mountain Area Safety Task Forces (MAST) in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties to facilitate an interagency approach to resolving the public safety threat caused by the extreme amount of vegetation mortality. Participants include the USDA Forest Service, USDA-Natural Resource Conservation Service, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, Riverside County, San Bernardino County, local Municipal Fire Departments, California Department of Transportation, Southern California Edison, South Coast Air Quality Management District, and local Fire Safe Councils. The MAST groups have developed common priorities in support of providing overall public safety. The MAST groups have facilitated a cooperative approach to achieving these objectives and working with affected publics.

## WORK PLANNING AND FUNDING

Working with MAST, the Forest has developed a work plan integrating the priorities and a timeline as follows:

### **1. Immediate Phase: FY2003**

- ? High Priority Evacuation Routes
- ? High Priority Communication Sites Protection
- ? Highest Priority Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Zones
- ? Highest Priority Public Use and Administrative Facilities Protection

## 2. Mid-Term Phase: FY2004 and FY2005

- ? Continue with key Evacuation Routes
- ? Continue with Communication Sites Protection
- ? Continue with other Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Zones
- ? Continue with other Public Use and Administrative Facilities Protection

## 3. Long-Term Phase: FY2006 and Beyond

- ? Identify and Construct Strategically Placed Land Area Treatment Zones
- ? Continue Planning and Budgeting for General Forest Health Treatments (Thinning/Dead Tree Removal)

**Chart 1** - The following chart illustrates the FY03 and FY04 planned outputs and costs for the drought-related vegetation mortality projects on the Forest.

PROJECT	PLANNED FY 03 OUTPUTS	PROJECTED FY 03 COSTS <sup>1/</sup>	PLANNED FY 04 OUTPUTS	PROJECTE D FY 04 COSTS
Priority Evacuation Routes	111 miles	\$1,200,000	106 miles	\$890,000
Priority Communication Sites Protection	55 acres	\$220,000	10 Acres	\$45,000
Priority Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Zones	7,104 acres	\$1,116,000	14,976 acres	\$14,850,000
Administration, NEPA, Public Relations, Grants, Research, Photography	-----	\$1,480,000	-----	\$1,500,000

<sup>1/</sup> The "Projected FY 03 Costs" column reflects funds currently allocated to the Forest. Additional allocations for Priority Wildland-Urban Interface Fire Protection Zones projects anticipated in FY 03 for additional contracts, surveys and planning

## WAYS TO EXPEDITE WORK

The Forest has sought ways to expedite work to remove dead trees and other hazardous fuels on National Forest land which is critical to protecting thousands of homes. The following help to expedite work projects:

**Use of Categorical Exclusions (CE) to Facilitate Environmental Review of Forest Health Restoration and Rehabilitation Projects** – The Forest has used CE category 6 for timber stand and wildlife habitat improvement to expedite environmental review on 7 projects and decisions issued before March 10, 2003 that have avoided sensitive

resources; i.e., threatened and endangered species, archaeological resources, etc. The newly released category of CE for hazardous fuel treatments is expected to improve the Forest's capability to respond by 40-50 percent.

**Alternative Arrangements with Council On Environmental Quality (CEQ) for Completing NEPA Analysis** – The Forest and the Pacific Southwest Region are exploring the applicability of this with the Washington Office. Though the Forest intends to use CE categories for hazardous fuels removal for the immediate priority projects, we will pursue alternative arrangements with CEQ for completing NEPA analysis.

**Improved Endangered Species Act Process to Expedite Decisions** – The San Bernardino National Forest has 40 species of plants and animals within the mortality area that are listed as threatened or endangered species. Expediting review of projects within those species' habitats is critical to protecting those species and their habitats from catastrophic fire. The Forest will submit a draft programmatic biological assessment to the USFWS addressing the types of activities and potential effects with expected hazardous fuels projects. After USFWS review of the draft programmatic biological assessment and comments are provided to the Forest, the Forest will prepare a final biological assessment by August 15, 2003 to initiate formal section 7 consultations. After USFWS completion of the programmatic biological opinion, the Forest will submit project-specific documentation that tier to the programmatic biological opinion. The Forest Service has agreed to provide financial support (\$80,000) to the USFWS to expedite these efforts with National Fire Plan funds that will address the needed emergency consultations.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is committed to assisting the Forest in using emergency consultation procedures when federally listed species are identified within project areas where public safety is threatened. The Forest and USFWS signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA), effective April 25, 2003, to follow a streamlined consultation process as delineated in the Department of Interior memo dated October 11, 2002 for all forest health projects. The MOA describes the planned process, and provides timelines and commitments for each agency.

**Use of Existing Contract Authorities to Expedite Work** – The magnitude of fuels reduction work needed to respond to this situation requires significant assistance from the private sector in addition to Forest Service work crews. Timber sale contracts have been awarded for hazardous fuel reduction projects in the wildland-urban interface or for hazard reduction along evacuation routes and at developed recreational sites. Several service contracts with product removal are also being prepared for advertisement for these types of projects. These types of contracts are especially useful where fuel reduction work involves removal of merchantable forest products as well as reducing fuel loads of non-merchantable vegetation. Additionally, service contracts without a product removal component are being prepared to ensure that key communication facilities can remain operational during a fire. To-date, the industry is responsive to the contracting opportunities available. With the current economy, we expect this will continue.

In accordance with Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) 6.304 (a)(3), the Forest submitted a justification and has received an exception to the Competition in

Contracting Act for emergency hazard reduction and forest resoration contracts, San Bernardino National Forest, under FAR 6.302-2 Unusual and Compelling Urgency.

**Use of Stewardship Contracts to Expedite Work** – The focus of stewardship contracting is to work with States, Tribes, and local communities to assist in enhancing and restoring entire landscapes. Because of the intermix of National Forest and private land, stewardship contracting offers tremendous potential to address long term restoration and maintenance within local communities. We anticipate using Stewardship Contract Authority as we approach the mid-term phase of the Forest's strategy. Interim guidelines have been released and the Forest has started an analysis of where and how to use this new authority for projects that have been identified and for the needed public involvement.

### **IN THE MONTHS AHEAD**

The situation on the San Bernardino is very dynamic. The immediate focus provides for public and employee safety by identifying and completing high priority evacuation routes protections, high priority communication sites protections, the highest priority wildland-urban interface fire protection zones, the highest priority public use and administration facilities protection, staging areas, and safety zones.